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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BAGHDAD 001988

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TAGS: [KIRF](#) [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [IZ](#)

SUBJECT: CHRISTIAN LEADERS DISCUSS JULY 12 CHURCH BOMBINGS

REF: A. BAGHDAD 1891
[1](#)B. BAGHDAD 1957
[1](#)C. BAGHDAD 1890

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Robert Ford for Reason 1.4 (d).

Summary

[1](#)1. (C) In the wake of the July 12 church bombings in Baghdad, we have met with representatives of the four largest churches in Iraq, including the heads of the Chaldean, Assyrian, and Syriac Catholic denominations as well as the Christian endowment and various Christian political leaders to express U.S. concern and solidarity. Church leaders tell us that the GOI has increased security around churches since the bombings and has promised additional financial support. At the same time, Christian religious leaders emphasize that the recent bombings are only a symptom of wider issues with regard to security, unemployment, and discrimination. In turn, we have stressed our continued commitment to the security and economic development of Iraq through our assistance programs to the Iraqi Security Forces and USAID. We have also pledged to raise with the GOI the need for effective security at Christian facilities and are exploring ways to establish a direct liaison between Christian religious leaders and ISF officials. End summary.

Latest on The Bombings

[1](#)2. (C) On July 12, six churches were bombed in simultaneous attacks throughout Baghdad resulting in four deaths and over 20 wounded (ref A). On July 13, a bomb also detonated in the vicinity of a church in Mosul, although it is not clear whether the attack was directed specifically against the church as a Shia mosque was also in the vicinity and suffered greater damage. Church leaders remain unsure of who is responsible for the bombings and have told us that they find it strange that no one has claimed responsibility. With respect to the Baghdad attacks, only one, a car bomb located at the Church of the Virgin Mary, resulted in casualties.

[1](#)3. (C) Georges Bakoos, the Prime Minister's Advisor on Christian Affairs, told Poloff on July 16 that he thought al-Qaida was responsible for this attack. He also stated that the MOI investigation into the car bombing revealed that there was a guard at the church at the time of the attack. According to Bakoos, the attacker parked his car with the bomb in front of the church, claimed he had broken down and told the guard he was going to find a mechanic. Rather than insist that the driver push his car away from the church or arrest him, the guard allowed the man to walk away and the bomb exploded some time later. Bakoos argued that this showed that security at churches was present, but that it needed to be better trained to prevent further attacks. Separately, Bishop Wardouni told the Charge on July 20 that after the first attack on July 12 against the Church of St. George, he had contacted the 11th division of the ISF which has responsibility for security in the area, but that they

could not respond in time to prevent the other bombings.

Embassy Outreach

¶4. (C) Since the attacks, the Embassy has met with Christian religious leaders to emphasize our strong interest in ensuring the safety and well being of Iraq's minority communities. On July 15, Ambassador Hill met with Patriarch of the Chaldean Church, Cardinal Emmanuel Delly (ref B) and on July 14, Poloff met with the Patriarch of the Assyrian Church Mar Addai. On July 20, the Charge hosted a lunch for group of Christian leaders including Archbishop Matti Matouka (head of the Syriac Catholic Church), Monsignor Rafael Qutaymi (Syriac Catholic), Bishop Shlaimon Wardouni (deputy Qutaymi (Syriac Catholic), Bishop Shlaimon Wardouni (deputy to the Chaldean Patriarch), Monsignor Nimat Benjamin and Father Youhanna Ayoub (Syriac Orthodox Church), and Raad Shammaa, the head of the Christian Endowment. During these meetings, we have sought to ascertain whether, in the opinion of Christian leaders, the GOI has taken sufficient steps to improve security as well as what actions we can take to assist.

GOI Response

¶5. (C) All of the leaders whom we met confirmed that the GOI has increased security around churches in Baghdad since July ¶12. Assyrian Patriarch Addai told Poloff that the Christian community was pleased with the GOI's rapid response to the

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attacks by placing extra guards at churches and increasing patrols in predominantly Christian neighborhoods. Monsignor Benjamin told the Charge that the increased presence of ISF at churches was a mixed blessing. He said that a number of churches now have humvees parked at the entrances and that while this may deter some attacks, it may also increase the likelihood by giving terrorists an opportunity to attack two targets (Christians and the ISF) at the same time. Benjamin and the other religious leaders also stated that some of the ISF guards placed at their churches were making a nuisance of themselves demanding that the churches provide them with food and shelter. Christian Endowment Director Shammaa responded that the Endowment had made clear to the ISF that if they could not provide for themselves, then the churches would rather not have them around.

¶6. (C) Bishop Wardouni confirmed to the Charge that the PM had met with Cardinal Delly on July 19. Wardouni said that the PM had promised the Cardinal both greater security and additional GOI funding to repair and rebuild churches. Wardouni stated that he had heard the PM make similar promises in the past, but that he seemed more forceful this time and had told the Cardinal to liaise with his advisor for Christian Affairs, Georges Bakoos, to make sure that the actions taken were satisfactory. Wardouni was clearly displeased with the PM and wondered why he had waited a week to make an official statement. (Note: The government's spokesman Ali al-Dabbagh condemned the attacks on July 13 along with Iraqi Vice President Abdel Mahdi. End note.)

¶7. (C) In a separate conversation with Poloff, but before the meeting between the PM and the Cardinal took place, Bakoos questioned why church leaders never informed him of the requests that they had made to the GOI so that he could follow up. Bakoos relayed an argument that he had with Christian Endowment Director Shammaa over the provision of extra guards to churches. Shammaa claimed that he had requested an additional 500 guards from the Council of Ministers three months prior to the attacks. Bakoos asked Shammaa why he had not also sent the request to him at the Prime Minister's office so that he could follow up and stated

that if Shammas and other Christian leaders continued to make requests without informing him that it was their own fault when the requests went unanswered. Poloff undertook to reiterate this message in future conversations with his Christian contacts.

Wider Issues Remain

18. (C) A common theme throughout the discussions with Christian leaders was their sense that the July 12 bombings were a symptom of wider issues that are plaguing their community. Archbishop Matouka summed up the concerns of the Christian community as being a lack of security, employment, and respect from Iraqi Muslims. In particular, the religious leaders outlined a long list of attacks that had occurred against their respective churches and clergy. The Charge acknowledged that security is indeed a concern for the Christian community, but noted that the Sunni and Shia communities also suffer at the hands of terrorists and thus the attacks were not really against only Christians, but against Iraqis as a whole. The Charge explained that despite the withdrawal of Coalition Forces from the cities, we continue to manage a robust training and equipment program that will increase the capabilities of the ISF. He also promised to see whether a direct point of contact could be established within the ISF whom Christian leaders could call if they had particular security concerns.

19. (C) With respect to employment, Shammas complained bitterly that despite its substantial resources the Christian endowment was hamstrung in its efforts to assist the churches because of its dearth of employees and because Iraqi law prevented the endowment from making cash payments to churches directly (ref C). Shammas was not certain that the PM's promise to provide additional economic assistance to Christian churches would amount to much given these restrictions. The Charge advised Shammas and the other leaders to work directly with the Ministry of Finance to resolve the problem as this ministry was ultimately responsible for allowing the endowment to increase its payroll. The Charge promised that we would raise the issue directly with Georges Bakos as well as the Ministry of Finance through the Economic Section if Shammas desired. At the same time, he also outlined the economic assistance that USAID and the PRTs are providing throughout Iraq that may be of use to the Christian community.

A Ray of Hope

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10. (C) Despite the difficult week that they have endured, Christian leaders were surprisingly upbeat in their assessment of their communities' resilience to the latest attacks. Patriarch Addai told Poloff that he was pleasantly surprised when a class that his church conducts during the summer was almost fully attended the day after the bombings. Bishop Wardouni said that the morning Mass this past Sunday at his church, which had been the site of the car bomb that killed four persons, was full although he did notice a slight drop in attendance at the evening Mass. Monsignors Benjamin and Qutaymi said that attendance was down slightly at their respective churches as well, but that the decline was not as dramatic as it might have been. Benjamin also stated that "people are more confident now" than they had been in the past. Even Archbishop Matouka admitted that the level of violence directed at the Christian church in 2009 was far lower than in the 2004-2007 timeframe.

Comment

¶11. (C) The latest tragedy represented by the July 12 attacks on Christian churches has refocused GOI attention on the security of Iraq's Christian community. The initial analysis of the attacks reveals that the security structure was in place to prevent them (i.e. guards were already at churches and the 11th Division of the ISF was contacted almost immediately by church leaders) but that it reacted either improperly (permitting a car to be parked in front of a church) or could not react fast enough (the coordinated attacks took place within two hours). The GOI also seems to be taking the situation seriously through its deployment of additional ISF to churches and designation of a representative within the PM's office to liaise with the Christian community directly to ensure that they assistance they need is in fact received. We will continue to monitor the situation to determine whether the GOI follows through on its commitments and look for ways that we might be able to assist. End comment.
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